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SUBJECT: Vlaams Belang Gains Position in Belgium's House of Representatives

¶1. (SBU) The far-right, nationalist Vlaams Belang (VB) party set political observers talking with its win of a vice-presidency slot in Belgium's House of Representatives July 12, in a vote that saw Flemish and Francophone House members opposing each other. VB is the fifth largest party in the House, and thus qualifies for slots on the House's executive board. In the past, both Flemish and Francophone parties worked together to deny VB such perks, a symbolic move since VB continued to enjoy public funding, pro rated to its numbers in the House, the same as other parties represented in Parliament. VB has also taken part in House commission and plenary discussions without any hindrance.

¶2. (SBU) The Francophone parties tried again this year to deny VB a House vice-presidency position, but failed to win support from the Flemish members (Francophone members are outnumbered 62 to 88 in the Parliament). Belgium's traditional political parties abide by self-imposed restrictions (the "cordone sanitaire") in their dealings with the Vlaams Belang, restrictions designed to ostracize VB by preventing it from joining any coalition government at any level. In Parliament, however, the "cordon sanitaire" is at times implemented differently, since it is difficult to deny "perks" when VB enjoys public funding based on the strength of its numbers. Elio Di Rupo, leader of the Francophone socialists, decried the VB appointment as an example of "Flemish domination." Di Rupo was quoted as saying "the francophone parties were resolutely opposed to seeing a racist and xenophobic party represented at the top of our federal system."

¶3. (SBU) While some observers have bemoaned the move as the "beginning of the end" for the "cordone sanitaire," others note that, despite the House vote to give VB the vice-presidency slot, none of the traditional political parties have any intention of starting political or government talks with the Vlaams Belang. VB will remain an opposition party at all levels of government.

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